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Chamber's focus is education

Group gets new leader, locale

By KAREN GREEN ALEXANDER

PLAINSBORO—As new leadership took the reins after a year of change in the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce, a physical move back to Princeton Borough was announced for the business group, which has been based in Plainsboro's Forrestal Village shopping district.

At its monthly luncheon meeting yesterday, the chamber introduced new Chairman Michael Hierl, president and CEO of Pacesetter Group of Companies. He replaces David L. Holmes.

Hierl will serve a two-year term. His company, based in Montgomery, consults on management.

Also at the luncheon, a guest state official described ongoing changes to make a public-business partnership more effective.

"In an information-based economy, like New Jersey, there are few opportunities for those without a decent and well-rounded education," said Adam M. Pechter, CEO and president of Prosperity New Jersey, a state organization designed to spur business development in the state.

"We need more technology graduates to keep the economy going," Pechter said, describing ongoing efforts to work with the education community.

Over the past year, Gov. James E. McGreevey has sought to foster a cooperative spirit between the education and business communities through Prosperity.

Princeton University President Shirley Tilghman was appointed co-chairwoman of the group in March.

Yesterday, Pechter told the business group the education focus is developing.

Pechter, who also was appointed in March, said he and the governor questioned whether Prosperity was effective under its previous focus.

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Prosperity's focus in recent years had been on trying to rebrand New Jersey from the Garden State to the "innovation state," said Pechter, after his speech.

But Pechter said education is an important part of developing the state's economy. "I think we can all agree that a good education is the cornerstone of a productive American life."

"New Jersey has one of the best educational infrastructures in America. And we are home to some of the greatest companies in the world," but the two have not been communicating effectively, Pechter said.

That was why Tilghman and Bill Weldon, chairman of Johnson & Johnson, were asked to jointly chair Prosperity's board, Pechter said.

Among initiatives started by Prosperity are four "career academies," including a partnership between PSE&G and Trenton Central High School, where students are exposed to the world of work and mentored, Pechter said.

Also, Prosperity worked with the HealthCare Institute of New Jersey and the Biotechnology Council of New Jersey and commissioned a study of business leaders on questions that asked what they would like to see in their work force, among other things, Pechter said.

The study, led by Harvard University Professor Michael Porter, will be used to develop an action agenda for government and the business and higher education communities, Pechter said.

Pechter told businesspeople at the chamber gathering that Prosperity wanted to hear from them about what they think is needed.

Prosperity has also worked to promote high-technology innovation, because the state's share of new patents in the field has been dropping year by year.

In June, the Princeton chamber made Kristen Appelget president, replacing Ellen Hodges, who resigned in late 2001.